

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 52 | Number 1 (Winter 1993)

pps. 102-105

Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America/ Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1993 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use,
not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America/ Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism." *The Annals of Iowa* 52 (1993), 102-105.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.11048>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America, by Lyle W. Dorsett. Library of Religious Biography. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991. xii, 212 pp. Notes, appendixes, index. \$14.95 paper.

Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism, by Roger A. Bruns. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992. 351 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY ROBERT F. MARTIN, UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

William Ashley "Billy" Sunday was the best known and most significant revivalist in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Between 1896 and 1935 he toured first his native Midwest and then the nation preaching in tent and tabernacle, espousing a simplistic but, for many, satisfying interpretation of Christianity. Contemporary popular opinion of Sunday was as sharply divided as the dichotomy between heaven and hell that the evangelist so vividly portrayed in his sermons. Proponents of socially conscious Christianity condemned his message as outmoded and regarded the evangelist himself as a reactionary or charlatan. Even some evangelicals had reservations about his unorthodox methods. Many others, however, regarded Sunday as God's admittedly unconventional messenger to a sinful and unrepentant nation. Associates and admirers contended that during his career Sunday preached to perhaps one hundred million persons and was responsible for the salvation of a million souls. Such claims may have been extravagant, but they accurately connote the evangelist's enormous appeal for millions of his contemporaries.

Two recent biographies of Sunday suggest that more than a half-century after his death in 1935 the Iowa-born "baseball evangelist" remains one of the most intriguing figures in the history of American Protestantism. Lyle W. Dorsett's *Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America* is the first scholarly treatment of Sunday's life and work since William G. McLoughlin's *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name*, published in 1955. McLoughlin's book remains unchallenged as the single best analysis of Sunday's evangelism, but Dorsett, who had access to Sunday family papers not available to McLoughlin, has produced a more intimate biography. He examines Sunday's roots in rural and small-town Iowa, describes his notable but not exceptional career as a major league baseball player, and analyzes in considerable depth his more than forty years in religious work, first with the YMCA, then as an advance man for the evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman, and finally as a revivalist in his

own right. Dorsett portrays Sunday as an enthusiastic, hard-working, honest, and sincere man, but he also believes that in spite of Sunday's rather pugnacious public image and his enormous success, he was plagued throughout his life by insecurity, stemming perhaps from a childhood marred by poverty, instability, and the death of several family members, including his father whom he never knew. Dorsett suggests that Helen Thompson Sunday, the evangelist's wife of almost fifty years and business manager for much of that time, not only contributed immeasurably to her husband's success but also routinely shored up Sunday's confidence and shielded him from much of the tedium of daily life.

Dorsett traces the evolution of Sunday's revivalism from the years when he traveled alone or with one or two associates around the "kerosene circuit" of the Midwest during the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century to the zenith of his success during the 1910s when as leader of a large evangelistic team he preached to millions in most of the nation's major metropolitan areas. To the chagrin of some and the approbation of others, Sunday transformed revivalism into a highly orchestrated businesslike endeavor. The size of the crowds, the amount of funds received, and the number of souls saved provided statistical measurements of the campaign's success. Dorsett does not question Sunday's genuine commitment to a conservative evangelical understanding of Christianity antithetical not only to the secularizing trends of his age but also to liberal currents within Christianity such as the higher biblical criticism and the social gospel. He does, however, suggest, without much evidence and thus not very persuasively, that Sunday was less reactionary in his social views than critics have charged. He does not consider Sunday either the ally or the pawn of big business in its struggle with labor, and he appears to regard the evangelist's views on women's rights and race relations as relatively enlightened.

Dorsett writes from an avowedly evangelical point of view. He considers Sunday's work to have been ordained by God. Nevertheless, he is critical of certain aspects of the revivalist's life and work. He believes that both Sunday and his wife had difficulty coping with success. They made the mistake of equating prosperity and fame with divine approval. Furthermore, as Sunday's revivals generated large revenues, they became accustomed to the good life and seemingly became obsessed with money. Money and success did not, however, bring happiness or satisfaction. The couple suffered from criticism of their large income; public scandals swirled about

the lives of their sons; and disagreements with their associates over money and practices plagued their campaigns.

Billy Sunday attributed many of his problems to the work of the Devil, but Dorsett makes clear that Sunday himself must bear considerable responsibility for his difficulties. He cites a letter written in the late 1920s by Homer Rodeheaver, Sunday's chorister for twenty years, which warned the evangelist that the declining fortunes of his ministry were due in part to excessively long sermons, an overemphasis on money, a lack of cooperation with local ministers, an increasingly impersonal relationship with those to whom he preached, and a watered-down call to salvation. Dorsett confirms Rodeheaver's assessment but also attributes the evangelist's declining fortunes during the twenties and thirties to such social forces as the advent of radio, the growing popularity of movies, and a backlash against fundamentalism, the Klan, World War I, prohibition, and eventually Republicanism, phenomena with which Sunday was associated in the popular mind.

In spite of many personal and professional shortcomings, Dorsett judges the effects of Billy Sunday's life and work to have been essentially positive. He admires Sunday for tenaciously and courageously continuing to preach the gospel as he understood it even as fundamentalists, religious liberals, and skeptics grew increasingly critical of his ministry. Furthermore, Dorsett argues that whatever the flaws in his character or methods his ministry touched and changed for the better the lives of tens of thousands of individuals.

This is the best study to date of the private side of Billy Sunday's life. Although some readers may judge the work too sympathetic to the controversial evangelist, much of Dorsett's analysis of his subject's personality and character is plausible if not always thoroughly substantiated. One of the chief problems with the study, perhaps because of the nature of the Library of Religious Biography series of which it is a part, is that it is rather brief and sometimes sketchy. An elaboration of the author's insights and a more thorough effort to set Sunday into the sociocultural context of the times would have substantially enhanced this volume.

Roger A. Bruns's *Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism* attempts a more comprehensive look at the life and times of the remarkable evangelist. This lively, breezily written, sometimes amusing biography obviously covers much of the same ground as Dorsett's book. Bruns, however, devotes considerably more time and energy to a discussion of such germane topics as major league baseball, nineteenth-century American revivalism, the

social gospel, the prohibition crusade, World War I patriotism, southern race relations, and the antiradicalism and fundamentalist controversies of the 1920s. This material provides a framework for understanding Sunday's career, and Bruns employs it effectively to add texture to the story he is relating. Unfortunately, he does not make use of this historical perspective to offer much new insight into the life and work of his subject. Although his study is very engaging, it is more a synthetic narrative than an innovative analysis.

Two features of Bruns's work are especially troubling. One is that he appears somewhat careless with facts. For example, he locates Fisk University in Atlanta, Georgia, rather than Nashville, Tennessee; states incorrectly that the Atlanta race riot occurred in 1907 rather than 1906; and refers to Sunday's travels on team buses while a professional baseball player in the 1880s well before the era of bus travel. Such errors are perhaps trivial in themselves—indeed the last may be a deliberate if rather odd anachronism—but they call into question the care with which the author has approached his task. A second feature of the book that is somewhat problematic is that the title implies a more extensive analysis of modern American evangelism and Sunday's impact on it than the book actually delivers. Near the end of the volume Bruns briefly discusses ways revivalists have grown more innovative and revivalism has become progressively more organized and businesslike, developments for which Sunday's career unquestionably served as a catalyst. He also notes certain lineal connections between Sunday and his successors, such as Billy Graham's conversion at a Sunday revival in Charlotte, North Carolina. While interesting and potentially illuminating, this brief analysis fails to fulfill expectations raised by the title.

Despite its shortcomings, this volume provides a useful synthesis of much of the existing scholarly work on Sunday's career and related subjects. While less overtly sympathetic to Sunday than Dorsett, Bruns is essentially uncritical. Nevertheless, he accurately captures the essence of the evangelist's life and work. However, since his study offers little new insight it will be of greater interest and value to the general reader than to the professional historian or student of American religion.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.